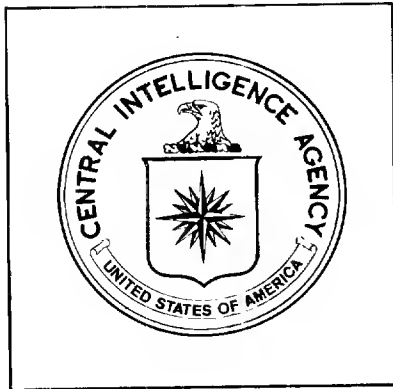


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Developments in Indochina

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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA

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CAMBODIA

Political Horse-trading

(x5666)

25X1A

Prime Minister Long Boret is reportedly ready to submit his slate of new ministerial candidates to President Lon Nol. Both the Republicans and Democrats--Phnom Penh's two major minority parties--declined Boret's invitation to participate in the new cabinet, but the Prime Minister persuaded several independents to allow their names to be submitted along with the nominations of the predominant party in the government, the Socio-Republicans.

As anticipated, the major new appointment will be Sak Sutsakhan as defense minister. Sutsakhan took over the top position in the military command last week following the resignation of armed forces commander in chief Sosthene Fernandez. Boret has long been pushing to combine the top posts in the armed forces and the defense ministry as a means of increasing civilian control over the military establishment. In addition to Sutsakhan's appointment, Boret will also recommend the replacement of several notoriously corrupt or inept ministers, the most important is the current minister of interior, Ek Proeung.

Boret anticipates little difficulty in obtaining Lon Nol's approval for Sak Sutsakhan's appointment, but believes that the President will push his own candidates for a number of other ministerial posts. A recent report, in fact, indicates that Lon Non, Lon Nol's politically ambitious younger brother, has his own list of ministerial candidates and has presumably been trying to get the president's backing for them. Most of Lon Non's choices are unacceptable to Long Boret and completion of the cabinet reshuffle will involve considerable horse-trading between Boret and Lon Nol. A serious confrontation could develop if either leader becomes too inflexible. (SECRET NO FOREIGN DISSEM/NO DISSEM ABROAD/BACKGROUND USE ONLY/CONTROLLED DISSEM)

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LAOS

The Military Remains Sympathetic
to the National Assembly

(x5666)

Since his return to Vientiane from Luang Prabang, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma has applied his limited energies to achieving dissolution of the rightist-dominated National Assembly. His efforts have failed to elicit support from top military leaders, hardened the position of his rightist opponents in the King's Council, and alienated many influential non-Communists.

[REDACTED] the Prime Minister, in an extraordinary move, convened a meeting in Vientiane of the Lao Armed Forces (FAR) general staff, military region commanders, and officials of the defense ministry, and requested support on the dissolution issue. Souvanna opened the meeting by castigating the King's Council for blocking the assembly's liquidation. After delivering in highly unfavorable terms a summary of the council's actions on the assembly, he focused on FAR's role in the issue. In an impassioned speech, the Prime Minister claimed that the situation is "highly dangerous and destructive to the peace that has been carefully nurtured," and said he feared that some senior military officers, duped into opposing dissolution, would start coup-plotting --which in turn could destroy the country's last chance for a permanent peace. Without elaborating, Souvanna claimed that the National Assembly issue has already led both sides to make preparations for an eventual outbreak of trouble. He ended his address by appealing to those present to trust and believe in his policies.

The Prime Minister's statements were not well received by the audience--several of whom have relatives


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serving in the assembly. According to some of the officers present, Defense Minister Sisouk na Champasak after the meeting implied that while coup-plotting would not be tolerated, FAR would continue to be sympathetic toward the King's Council and would not contribute to the assembly's liquidation. Other military leaders agreed.

Predictably, the King's Council has learned of the Prime Minister's caustic references to its deliberations on the dissolution issue, and the members, particularly council president Prince Khammao, have reacted strongly. Most council members feel that the King, a strict constitutionalist, appreciates their deliberate tactics to drag out the dissolution process as long as possible. He also applauds their efforts to obtain written assurances from the government that dissolution will be accomplished without abrogating the constitution.

The council believes that Souvanna's meeting with the military group was an attempt to apply pressure on the council. In a move that will be sure to agitate Souvanna further, Prince Khammao decided last week to postpone further deliberations on the issue of dissolution for at least ten days, out of respect for a recently deceased council member. (SECRET NO FOREIGN 25X1A DISSEM/CONTROLLED DISSEM)



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Refugee Resettlement
(x5666)

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The refugee resettlement effort in Laos is acquiring an international image. According to an official Pathet Lao radio broadcast, two Aeroflot AN-24s are scheduled to arrive at Vientiane's Wattay airport this week, joining Royal Air Lao and non-Communist military aircraft in the airlift task. Soviet interest in the resettlement operations was first noted last month when an Aeroflot representative, along with several other Soviet personnel, made an inspection trip of the airfield at Xieng Khouang on the Plaine Des Jarres. The AN-24s, which are capable of carrying at least 40 passengers, will probably begin ferrying refugees from the capital to Xieng Khouang before the week is out.

Chinese involvement is also likely. The Pathet Lao reportedly have supplies in Luang Prabang and Sam Neua earmarked for the refugees arriving on the Plaine, but the poorly developed transport system in the Communist areas is inhibiting the delivery of the much-needed materials. To expedite transfer of the goods, the Pathet Lao might well be considering asking the Chinese to make a limited number of cargo flights. The Chinese have participated in previous airlift operations involving the royal capital and Pathet Lao headquarters.

Last month the Australian embassy offered the coalition government an Australian air force transport plane for the refugee airlift. The aircraft arrived in early March, but it reportedly developed mechanical problems after its first flight and withdrew from the airlift. Eventually the plane was flown back to its home base outside Penang, Malaysia. While mechanical difficulties may indeed have arisen, the withdrawal of the Australians from the airlift may also stem from Australian Ambassador Borthwick's

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growing anger with the Pathet Lao over their continued denials--despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary--of any knowledge of the missing Australian tourist Neil Sharman and his American traveling companion Charles Dean.

As of mid-March more than 13,000 refugees had been relocated to either Xieng Khouang or Phong Savan, six miles to the east. While a few were filmed disembarking by an NBC television crew, the rest have been quietly and quickly moved from the landing strips to nearby temporary quarters by the Pathet Lao. The relatively small UN staff in charge of the airlift has been extremely busy organizing the refugees for the flights and has not yet had time to make any inspections of village sites in the Communist zone.

The resettlement flights are scheduled to end about April 1, and the inspection trips, which are high priority tasks for the UN staff, should begin shortly thereafter. Recently the local UN officials have been concerned with rumors filtering out of the Communist zone that returning refugees are not being allowed to return to their village of origin and are being treated in an excessively regimented fashion. The vernacular press, for example, recently reported that a refugee, who had been airlifted, managed to come back to the non-Communist side. He left his family behind and expressed disappointment at the treatment received from Pathet Lao authorities. 25X1A
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